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ABSTRACT

More than one-third of U.S. newspapers use various kinds of systematic survey research other than that provided by Gallup or Harris, and broadcast networks have polling units that are part of their news divisions. However, as most of the media employ them, opinion polls provide a genuine basis for "broad, sweeping generalizations." News media polls do less to provide public knowledge about issues, events, and political personalities than superficial acquaintance with public perceptions. Most polls, for instance, limit themselves to single indicators of public views rather than employ multiple indicators. Possible misuses and abuses of polls and news media coverage of them produces concern among professional pollsters, politicians, scholars, and the mythical "man in the street." In addition to the thought that must be given to the development and enforcement of adequate standards (i.e., suggested codes, legislative action), the news media must give due consideration to how serious they are about the use of polls to provide the basis for interpretive reporting, generalizations, and predictions. Given the costs of polling, there is a strong temptation to cover a variety of issue areas within a single amalgam poll. More sophisticated multi-dimensional designs would be in order to improve the quality of their polling. A four-page list of references is provided. (NKA)

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POLITICAL POLLING AND PUBLIC KNOWLEDGE

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Abstract The news media have sponsored and used political polling as a means of reporting upon public views for several decades. Life magazine's survey of residents in a representative county in the 1940 presidential election is a case in point, one which in many respects set the format for media reports of polls in later years. As reported, however, news media polls do less to provide public knowledge about issues, events, and personalities than superficial acquaintance with public perceptions. Most polls, for instance, limit themselves to single indicators of public views rather than employ multiple indicators, a tendency exemplified in published polls regarding the issue of public funding of congressional campaigns. Many news media polls are exploited for political advantage, in part as a result of their superficial qualities. Efforts at improving the quality of polls and their news results have met with mixed results.

POLITICAL POLLING AND PUBLIC KNOWLEDGE

It is early November 1940, and the latest issue of Life magazine, selling for 10 cents, reaches the news stands. The cover features the boyish face of college football's player of the year, "Michigan's Great" Tom Harmon. The lead story offers "historic pictures" of the unification of Europe under the fascist powers. Life's "Picture of the Week" is a posed photo of the first draftee whose name had been chosen by lot in this nation's newly enacted conscription of men for military service. Advertisements inform readers that they can purchase a 1941 Pontiac coupe for $852, a Goodrich auto battery for $4.45, Prestone anti-freeze for $2.65 a gallon, and a Coca-Cola or Hires root beer for a nickel. Maxwell House is "good to the last drop," Lucky Strike Green has not yet gone to war (Life, November 11, 1940, pp. 95-103).

On page 95 of this Life issue begins an article entitled "The People's Choice: Life Survey Discloses Why People Voted as They Did in This Week's Election." It is the eve of the 1940 presidential election between Franklin Roosevelt, the incumbent Democrat, and Republican challenger Wendell Wilkie. Life, in collaboration with Columbia University's Office of Radio Research, Elmo Roper, and Fortune, has pioneered "a new development of the scientific-sampling poll of public opinion." The purpose: "not to discover how people were going to vote on November 5, but why they intended to vote as they did (Life, November 11, 1940, p. 95). The study, based upon surveys with a representative cross-section of citizens of Erie County, Ohio, would later appear in book form, earning the reputation of being a classic of the voting behavior literature (Lazarsfeld, Berelson, & Gaudet, 1944). But for Life on election eve in

1940, "the findings are already enough to give every thoughtful American an exciting plenty to think about (Life, November 11, 1940, p. 95).

Life's effort was not the first by the news media to describe and explain voting preferences. The Raleigh Star and North Carolina State Gazette and the Wilmington American Watchman and Delaware Advertiser canvassed political sentiment at various gatherings as early as 1824 (Tankard, 1972, pp. 361-365). Nor would Life's survey be the last poll undertaken with the sponsorship of a news organization, as readers and viewers of newspapers, newsmagazines, and televsion news now deluged with political polls know only too well. But Life's "The People's Choice" was one of the first to build a news story through opinion soundings conducted via of polls prior to the breaking event of major concern, i.e., the election. The way Life presented the "why" rather than the "how" of vote intentions typifies how the news media still employ polls for similar purposes and illustrates both the merits and defects of news organizations' attempts to increase public knowledge through political polls.

Perhaps assuming that readers would find detailed analyses of statistical data turgid, the editors of Life are terse in the presentation of quantified findings. Three short paragraphs note the proportions of Erie County citizens who changed their vote intentions during the campaign (45 percent), when they changed, and the reasons, concluding that "the size of the percentage who did form opinions during the campaign indicates that Americans as a whole are far more open-minded, less set in partisan prejudices, than many critics think" (Life, November 11, 1940, p. 96). In addition, three table/figure drawings offer breakdowns of voting intention in May and October; what happened to Republicans, Democrats, Don't Knows, and Won't Votes during the campaign; a demographic breakdown of voters by

changing intentions; and an illustration that voting intentions and social class do not always coincide, thereby prompting the felicitous conclusion that "America is preserved from the hard and fast class divisions that characterized the Old World. The great middle class is the hope and faith in democracy" (Life, November 11, 1940, p. 101).

As expected in a newsmagazine such as Life pictorial presentation overrides analysis. To illustrate that Erie County of all counties most nearly represents the nation the editors offer air photos of the farming community and lakefront, along with scenes from the Sandusky sailing club, a labor union meeting, the office of a local newspaper, a bridge party at the Federation of Women's Clubs, a barbershop, a conclave of local Democrats, Wendell Wilkie on the rear-platform during a train stop in Sandusky, and a gathering of the Moose Club. Eight photos represent the 34 percent of Erie countians intending to vote Democrat--a farmer, a foreman, a factory office worker, a printer, a slitting-scoring machine operator, and the wives respectively of a farmer, greenhouse superintendent, and retired railroad watchman. Republicans include the owner of a 5 cents--to--1 cents store, fruit basket manufacturer, farmer, farmer's wife, retired watch-maker, bookkeeper, and wife of a laborer for the New Deal's Works Progress Administration (WPA). The 12 percent of citizens declaring they would not vote are typified by a smiling, middle-aged matron in a flowered dress who "takes no interest in politics and knows no other women who do" (Life November 11, 1940, p. 102). Charles Flanders, a schoolteacher, is one of the 9 percent of Erie countians who "don't know," a set of "extremely interested and conscientious citizens with minds still torn and teetering between conflicting campaign arguments" (Life, November 11, 1940, p. 103).

This focus upon Life's 1940 voting survey is not intended to disparage what for then was a unique attempt to build a news story around a political poll. Although clearly cheering for the American Way, given the space available, the news values inherent in such a product, and assumptions about readers' interests, the nine-page Life account rates highly. Today the four-decade old story appears far less quaint, far more up-to-date than ads for the Studebaker, Kreml hair tonic, and overnight Pullman rides, or stories of football players in leather helmets and the lazy day of the New York World's Fair. Regardless of the quality of the 1940 Life presentation, however, it exemplifies the fundamental character of the reporting of political polls, i.e., that polls conducted primarily for consumption, publicity, and exploitation by the news media add not to public knowledge of political figures, issues, and events but instead to a superficial acquaintance with political affairs. In exploring that character this article will, first illustrate the problems associated with poll data in the news media that minimize any contribution to public knowledge; second, note the manipulative potential of poll reporting; and, third, raise questions implied in practices of reporting political polls.

NEWS MEDIA POLLING:
ACQUAINTANCE WITH OR KNOWLEDGE ABOUT?

Since the early 1970's, both newspapers and network news have increased the use of polls in the process of gathering information for news stories. More than one-third of U. S. newspapers use various kinds of systematic survey research other than that provided by such syndicated

polls as Gallup or Harris (Rippey, 1980, pp. 642-646). CBS, NBC, and ABC have polling units that are a part of their respective news divisions (Crespi, 1980, p. 464). "Perhaps the most notable characteristic of this recent growth is the expansion of media-conducted polls, as differentiated from the media-sponsored poll" (Crespi, 1980, p. 464). Dom Bonafede in an assessment of the news media's use of opinion polls quotes The Washington Post's polling specialist, Barry Sussman, on why that newspaper makes use of such public opinion research:

> If we can find out what people are thinking in basic, simple terms on clear-cut issues and no longer have to be captives of politicians and others who spout off, it is a device, when done right--which is not easy--that allows us to make broad, sweeping generalizations with confidence, something an individual reporter has one hell of a time doing. (1978, p. 34).

Commendable though the rationale, there is question that as most of the news media employ them opinion polls provide a genuine basis for "broad, sweeping generalizations." In the same year that Life magazine published its pre-election survey of voter sentiment in Erie County, sociologist Robert Park undertook an insightful analysis of the character of news (Park, 1940, pp, 669-686). As a practicing sociologist and former journalist Park was interested in treating news as a from of knowledge. Drawing upon the work of philosopher William James (1896), Park distinguished between two "fundamental" types of knowledge, i.e., "acquaintance with" and "knowledge about" (Park, 1940, p. 669; see Weaver and McCombs, 1980, p. 485). Elaborating upon this distinction Roshco notes

that the former is concrete and descriptive, emphasizing facts and frequently gained through personal experience. "Knowledge about" something, in contrast, is abstract, analytical, and conceptual (Roshco, 1975, p. 14). "News," writes Roshco "if not enhanced by knowledge-about, provides only superficial understanding of what is being reported." But, "the bare acquaintance-with what is 'pure' news may be the basis for more informative journalism that includes a quantity of knowledge-about." Thus, observes Roshco, "a news story often includes untimely 'background' information that is not, strictly speaking, news" (Roshco, 1975, p. 14).

One rationale underlying news media polling is to provide context and background revealing, in effect, "knowledge about" or "broad, sweeping generalizations." But there are a multitude of examples to suggest that the news media publish poll data largely as facts for their own sake, not as what Park would have required as systematic knowledge. Findings of news media polling frequently emerge as concrete, specific, isolated, and descriptive data, not tests of propositions within an abstract context. Put differently, the news media present poll data in a modified guise of what Edward Sapir called condensation symbols, i.e., as generalizable information symbolizing a host of interpretations, indications, and conclusions to round out a story, a form of knowledge-about (Sapir, 1930, pp. 492-495). Behind that guise, however, is the more correct view that poll data are referential symbols, that is, specific data referring to specific questions asked of specific people at specific times in specific places. The poll data thus provide acquaintance with specificities, but not necessarily anything more (Margolis, 1984, p. 65; see Vatz, 1976, pp. 196-206).

As Bishop, Oldendick, Tuchfarber, and Bennett have demonstrated, the

"acquaintance with" public opinion provided by news media polling is sometimes misleading, sometimes contradictory. These researchers revealed that one third of persons polled were willing to express an opinion regarding the Public Affairs Act of 1975, a purely fictitious statute (1980, pp. 198-209). To the degree that news media polling taps such pseudo-opinions, published results are misleading (Lang and Lang, 1984, pp. 129-142; see Schuman and Presser, 1980, pp. 1214-1225). Or take contradictory findings flowing in large measure from differing question wordings contained in surveys. Baron (1980a) cites readily available illustrations. In June 1978, for example a Harris Poll found that 69% favored, 19% opposed when asked "Do you favor or oppose detente--that is the United States and Russia seeking out areas of agreement and cooperation?" Yet, in a CBS/New York Times release of a poll the same month asking "What do you think the U. S. should do--should the U. S. try harder to relax tensions with the Russians or instead should it get tougher in its dealings with the Russians?," 30% favored relaxation, 53% wanted to get tougher. Similarly, in late 1977 the CBS/New York Times poll found 74% who agreed, 22% who disagreed that "The right of a woman to have an abortion should be left to the woman and her doctor." A Harris Poll in early 1978 found 42% responding affirmatively, 40% negatively with the question, "Do you support legalized abortion up to three months of pregnancy?" (Baron, 1980a, pp. 21-25).

A partial corrective to the tendency of news media polling to acquaint but not inform readers/viewers lies among the willingness of a relatively few survey firms to take a page from the social scientist's book and utilize and report multiple indicators of opinions measured (Cook and Sellitz, 1964, pp. 36-55). Views of Americans regarding the public

financing of congressional campaigns provides an illustration.

In 1977, the Gallup Poll reported asking a nationwide sample of 1500 adults whether public funding of congressional elections was a "good" or "poor" idea: "It has been suggested the federal government provide a fixed amount of money for the election campaigns of candidates for Congress and that all private contributions from other sources be prohibited. Do you think this is a good idea or a poor idea?" Results indicated 57 percent thought it was a good idea, 32 percent poor and 11 percent had no opinion. In a survey conducted precisely two years later--March 25-28, 1979--the same question elicited almost identical results: 57 percent responded it was a good idea, 30 percent poor and 13 percent had no opinion (The Gallup Opinion Index, Report No. 144, July 1977, pp. 11-12.; The Gallup Opinion Index, Report No. 166, May 1979a, pp. 29-30).

As reported in the news media, the Gallup findings offer a straightforward statement of majority support for public funding that crosses virtually all demographic categories. Yet, without charging that any intentional biasing existed in question wording, it is possible to ponder which of a variety of cues moved respondents: "federal government," "fixed amount of money," "private contributions," "prohibited," or simply "good" or "poor." Straight forward though the evidence might seem, the question contained confounding indicators that no amount of precision in sampling design and analysis could negate.

Also in the early spring of 1977--and again in 1978, 1979, and 1980--Civic Service Incorporated conducted nationwide surveys, releasing to the news media reports, on the public funding question (Civic Service, Inc., 1977; 1978; 1979; 1980). Sample sizes in each year were m=2500 in 1977, 1602 in 1978, 1659 in 1979, 1500 in 1980. Proportions of demographic

groupings in each survey paralleled those in comparable Gallup studies. Moreover, on a variety of issues other than the public funding question both Civic Service and Gallup surveys obtained similar results. For instance, in 1979 the Gallup Poll found 45 percent of its sample favoring a return to the military draft, 46 percent opposed, 9 percent of no opinion (The Gallup Opinion Index, Report No. 169, August 1979b, p. 9). Civic Service in its 1979 survey found 47 percent favoring the resumption of the draft, 48 percent opposed, and the remainder of no opinion (Civic Service, Inc., 1979).

On the public funding question, Civic Service surveys employed a variety of indicators measuring public responses. First, there was a "benchmark" question early in each survey: "It has been proposed in Congress that the federal government provide public financing for congressional campaigns for the U. S. House of Representatives and Senate. Would you approve or disapprove of the proposal to use public funds, federal money, to pay the costs of congressional campaigns and how strongly do you feel?" (response options included strongly approve, approve, disapprove, strongly disapprove, and no opinion). Like the Gallup question, this too contained a number of loaded cues--public funds, federal money, public finance, etc. Results were considerably at variance with those of the Gallup Poll. Approval/disapproval percentages were 33/63 in 1977, 22/67 in 1978,, 22/68 in 1979, 24/68 in 1980. If the news media had no other information to report but responses to the respective questions of Gallup and Civic Service cited here, readers and viewers would be forced to conclude that there is considerable contradiction in public views on the issue.

However, Civic Service surveys followed the benchmark question with a

series of probes designed to tap other facets of opinion on the public funding issue. First, respondents were asked to select a definition from closed-end alternatives. Results appear in Table 1.

TABLE 1 ABOUT HERE

As noted there is no consensus definition of what public funding is, nor what the proposal might imply. Civic Service news releases--the only source of information available for adequate comparison to Gallup findings--report that among respondents able to identify some aspect of public financing of congressional campaigns in the definition question, more informed respondents disapprove of the proposal in proportions of 2 to 1. In addition to the definition problem Civic Service surveys asked respondents to respond to a variety of propositions involving the public funding question. Table 2 provides percentages of agreement with selected propositions as reported in Civic Service releases for three of the survey years (the release of the 1979 poll provided no such information).

TABLE 2 ABOUT HERE

Although the tracking in Table 2 reveals general patterns, it is noteworthy that considerable division exists regarding whom would be favored--incumbent or challenger--were public financing of congressional campaigns adopted. Given the confusion over what defines public funding, it is perhaps no surprise that expectations and assessments would not be clear-cut.

Two other key questions appear in Civic Service's reported findings on

the public funding question. Asked whether public funding should be adopted now to "renew confidence in our electoral system" or whether other priorities now require attention before decisions are made on public funding, more than three-fourths of respondents in the annual surveys believe other matters are of higher priority.

Finally, after the types of probes indicated Civic Service surveys return to the question of approval or disapproval:

> Let's just review in conclusion: Public financing of congressional campaigns is being considered by Congress. Some say it's essential to clean up elections, restore competition, remove special interest money and equalize the power of wealthy candidates. Others say it's unconstitutional, wrong to require taxpayers to support candidates they don't approve of, ignores other government priorities for tax money and that campaigns should be financed by candidates and their supporters rather than the taxpayers. When all of the arguments are considered, do you approve or disapprove of the proposal to use public financing, the tax dollar support, to pay the costs of congressional election campaigns and how strongly do you feel?

When response categories are collapsed into approval/disapproval proportions, the percentage breakdown for surveyed years is 25/52 in 1977, 27/66 in 1978, 26/66 in 1979, and 28/62 in 1980.

It is not our intent to claim Gallup or Civic Service findings are more valid or reliable on the public funding question. Nor do we contend that one or the other of the two organizations asked the correct, objective question on the issue. Our purpose is not to suggest that one word or

phrase is correct, but rather it is to suggest that on public funding--as on virtually any foreign or domestic issue--public views are complex, often contradictory, frequently confused, and multi-faceted (see Ladd, 1980, pp. 574-584; Wheeler, 1980, pp. 41-45; Roll and Cantril, 1972). If news media polling (or the organizations contracted to undertake such surveys) are to provide knowledge about those views, rather than falsely simplistic acquaintance with them, there is a distinct advantage, even necessity, to employ and report multiple indicators of opinions (Nisbett and Ross, 1980; Bishop, Oldendick, Tuchfarber, 1980; Cook and Sellitz, 1964). In addition, it has been suggested that the media use several research approaches such as content analysis, behavioral studies, or experiments in the quest for understanding about political affairs (Ismach, 1984).

EXPLOITING NEWS POLLS

Daniel Boorstin in his book The Image (1961) suggested that the mass media had gone beyond "news gathering" to "news making," or the production of "pseudo-events" (Boorstin, 1961). Gollin uses Boorstin's concept of the "pseudo-event" to explain the use of public opinion polls by newspapers and broadcast networks. For Gollin, the pseudo-event is something that is created by the news organization "specifically in order to be reported, whose ambiguity of meaning is intrinsic to its interest, and that often has the character of a self-fulfilling prophecy" (Gollin, 1980, p. 449). Crespi suggests that this so-called self-fulfilling prophecy is a feedback loop, "in which (1) definitions of what is news, (2) determine the content of polling, which (3) affects the political process, (4) which then becomes news" (Crespi, 1980, p. 466). Similarly, Broh writes that "a poll suggests

an issue to which there is a political response, which is then reported, and another poll is taken to determine the response to the action, beginning a sort of chain reaction" (Kovach, 1980, pp. 570-571). In essence then, the reporting of polls is a process of news creation.

To the degree that publicized reports of news related polls provide more of a superficial acquaintance with expressed views of persons sampled than contextually rich knowledge about them, findings indeed lend themselves to "broad, sweeping generalizations," often so broad and sweeping as to be exploited as political tools of persuasion rather than dispassionate reports. And, even if not intended to persuade, published poll results can contribute misunderstanding rather than public knowledge.

One such dilemma is the problem of interpretation of poll data. Paletz, Short, Baker, Campbell, Cooper, and Oeslander report that:

> On April 29, 1977 the New York Times published a lengthy article based on a CBS/Times survey. It began with the following paragraph: 'Public support of President Carter has broadened in the first 100 days of his Administration because many Americans, especially those who voted against him last November, believe he has turned out to be more conservative than they expected.' The CBS evening news story of the preceding night, based on the identical survey data, made no mention of conservatism whatsoever. (1980, p. 508; see Naughton, April, 29, 1977, p. 1)

Broh quotes Burns Roper's satirical letter to the editor of The New York Times to illustrate the problems in the interpretation of public opinion polls:

To the Editor:

...It had not occurred to me to combine from out 'instant' debate poll the 31 percent who thought Governor Carter won with the 30 percent who felt it was a draw and conclude '...a total of 61 percent of those polled thought that the debate was a draw or a Carter victory.' Nor was I perspicacious enough to recognize that 'in political terms,' that was an excellent result for the nominee of the stronger party. (However, I became more confused when I read) that since the President's strength prior to the debate was only about 33 percent (more or less, depending on which poll you read), the debate was a victory for the President since his win-plus-draw figure was 61 percent according to the Associated Press poll--roughly twice the percentage preferring him prior to the debate....I had looked simplistically at our 39 percent Ford, 31 percent Carter, 30 percent draw figures and concluded that President Ford has a small edge. It is now obvious to me that it was either a clear victory for Governor Carter or an overwhelming win for President Ford. (Broh, 1980, pp. 527-528; see Roper, October 7, 1976, p . 46)

An example of the consequences of the interpretations placed on news polling lies in what is becoming known as the "expectation game" (Baron, 1980b, pp. 6-7; see Felton, 1980). During election campaigns, especially during the quadrennial season of presidential primaries, the polls released by news media frequently create the standards and backdrop for evaluating a candidate's performance. Candidates find themselves running against not only visible opponents but against what one writer has called "Expected" (Schardt, March 24, 1980, pp. 89-90). Failure to measure up to what polls

lead citizens to expect is an adequate performance may lead to a candidate's being labeled a loser even if victorious.

Illustrations of the outcomes of expectations games abound. Only the most obvious need be cited to amplify the point. In 1968, news media polls yielded the expectation that Eugene McCarthy would gain 10-15 percent of the votes in the Democratic presidential primary in New Hampshire; he lost to the write-in candidacy of Lyndon Johnson by 49.6 to 41.9 percent, yet the news media touted his better than expected showing as a victory. Four years later, as a result of news media polling, journalists pronounced that victory for Edmund Muskie would be defined as matching his expected majority of the vote in the Democratic presidential primary; he received 46 percent, George McGovern received a better than expected 37 percent and, hence, Muskie "lost" to McGovern. However, in 1980 in New Hampshire, Edward Kennedy received the same vote percentage (37.5) as McGovern's 1972 "victory," yet because it was far below the heady preprimary expectations of late 1979, Kennedy lost to Jimmy Carter's 47.5 percent, a proportion that had been considered a loss when Muskie had received it in 1972.

Given the circumstances there is an overpowering tendency for candidates to manipulate expectations, either attempting to lower them so as not to be judged by highly elevated standards or to raise them for bandwagon effects. This can mean release of misleading poll results for media and public consumption. Thus, according to Baron, a straw poll of Democratic activists in Maine gave Jimmy Carter a 55-45 percentage margin over Edward Kennedy. But to lower expectations, and with an eye toward state caucuses and primaries, Carter supporters transposed the figures. Published reports of the straw poll--55 percent for Kennedy, 45 percent for Carter--not only lowered expectations for Carter and raised them for

Kennedy, but held promise of a "surprise" and "upset" should Carter do well in Maine on later official counts (Baron, 1980b).

Pressures to play the expectation game exist at all electoral levels. And, where pollsters do not adhere to the canons of survey research and/or the news media are unaware of those canons, the exploitation of polls to mislead can be considerable. Miller and Hurd report that American newspapers often do not conform to established standards (for reporting poll results) of the American Association for Public Opinion Research (AAPOR) (1982, pp. 243-349; see for example, Noelle-Neumann, 1980, pp. 585-597). But all research does not suggest this. Recently Salwen has reported that the Detroit News and Free Press had shown a "dramatic improvement in the reporting of methodological information in public opinion polls" during presidential years, 1968-1984 (1985, p. 276). However, it must be remembered that the Salwen study (1985) only examined two rather unusual newspapers in one American city. The Detroit News and Free Press are unusual in that both newspapers use professional polling organizations and that in many instances, actual representatives from the polling organizations wrote the news stories (Salwen, 1985, pp. 276-277). Similarly, an advantageous position existed for both newspapers in that highly informed and qualified individuals were either on staff or served in a consulting capacity during those years. The News often published stories written by Frederick Currier, president of Market Opinion Research, and Michael Traugott of the Institute for Social Research at the University of Michigan. The Free Press had Philip Meyer who later authored Precision Journalism (an introductory journalism text on polling and the reporting of polling). In addition, Angus Campbell of the University of Michigan's Survey Research Center was often consulted in the preparation of the Free

Press articles (Salwen, 1985, pp. 276-277). Clearly, the results of the Salwen study can not be found to be representative of the nation's newspapers.

In a recent case in point, in a mayoralty contest is a major southern city, for example, rival newspapers on the same day published separate polls, each claiming the lead for each of the rival candidates. One poll--a mailed questionnaire involving 800 mailings to residents with 314 responses--reported a majority of respondents undecided. Yet the reporting newspaper called the five percentage point lead of one candidate "substantial." The other poll--of 212 eligible voters found two-thirds undecided, 16 percent for one candidate, five percent for each of two other candidates, five percent "apathetic," and four percent for all other candidates combined. The poll's press release was duly reported in the news media as indicating the plurality candidate "clearly in the lead." In neither case did the news media report sampling procedures, question wording, error margins, etc. In sum, the news media reported poll data of questionable validity and reliability as a standard news story (Nimmo, 1981, pp. 193-212; see Miller and Hurd, 1982).

PUBLICIZED POLLS: PUBLIC ACQUAINTANCE, KNOWLEDGE, OR DECEPTION?

As noted, news media polling and/or the publicity given to polls can be misleading. In some cases, as with polls on detente or abortion cited earlier, published findings are contradictory. On other issues--public funding of congressional campaigns is but one--publicizing the pro and con responses can mask public confusion, ignorance, and ambiguity with false

simplicity. And in yet other instances when the expectation game is in vogue, polls can be manipulated for tactical gains, perhaps even outright deception. The possible misuses and abuses of polls and news media coverage of them produces concern in many places--among professional pollsters, members of the news media, politicians, scholars, and the mythical "man in the street." Such concern gives rise to a variety of suggestions intended to improve the quality of news polling, thus making opinion soundings instruments of public knowledge rather than of public acquaintance, confusion, or deception.

One approach has been to draw up codes and guidelines for the conduct and release of opinion polls. The American Association for Public Opinion Research (AAPOR) has established standards for reporting public opinion polls, standards adopted by the National Council on Public Opinion Polls and other organizations. AAPOR standards specify that it is the obligation of the news media to inform themselves of the credentials of poll results and to report those results in light of those credentials. As standards of minimum disclosure AAPOR guidelines urge that news releases and stories identify the sponsors of surveys, exact wordings of questions asked, a definition of the population sampled, sample size (if mailed questionnaires report both number sent and returned), sampling error, use of sub-samples, methods of interviewing, and the timing of poll results in relation to relevant events.

Admirable though such standards, there are problems in obtaining the cooperation of pollsters and news media in meeting them. One lies in the fact that AAPOR guidelines do not apply to non-members or to groups not adopting them. Add to this that a large segment of the news media are generally ignorant of the subtleties of polling techniques and cover poll

results as conventional news stories (Crespi, 1980, p. 473; see Noelle-Neumann, 1980). It is thus not difficult to understand that frequently there is little or no effort to distinguish between valid and reliable surveys and those of a haphazard, person-on-the-street, straw poll variety. Moreover, as Wheeler notes, the Standards Committee of the American Association for Public Opinion Research conducts factual investigations of abuses, but judgments about deceptive practices are infrequent (Wheeler, 1976). A committee report for 1979 noted that only one matter brought before it was of sufficient seriousness to warrant a preliminary review committee. And, in a statement of disillusionment, the Standards Committee's report attempts at educating the news media to the nuances and standards of poll reporting: "A workshop planned for members of the Media to be held in conjunction with AAPOR's Annual Conference in Chicago had to be cancelled for lack of interest on the part of the Fourth Estate. A new approach will be attempted" (Hughes, 1979, p. 5).

Efforts at self-regulation through suggested codes, guidelines, and standards thus meet with mixed results. Seeking more active enforcement some critics of news media polls have called for legislative or administrative action. In 1972, for example, Rick Tropp called for legislation establishing in detail the kinds of information that should be disclosed in any poll (Tropp, 1972, pp. 46-52). Contempt citations would serve as adequate punishment for violators on grounds that mere citation itself, and the publicity given to it by the news media, would discredit any poll that abused outlined standards and procedures. Whether such a Federal Polls Procedure Disclosure Act would be advisable remains in doubt. In any event, demands for such legislation have been muted and ensuing debate relatively minimal.

An office within the Government Division, Congressional Research, of the Library of Congress is available upon request of congressional personnel to contact pollsters and investigate the techniques and practices used in conducting surveys. But such a review is faced with the fact that political polling is both art and science. Statisticians, sampling designers, students of rhetoric of questionnaire design, and other survey experts are not always agreed regarding acceptable procedures. Moreover, demands and pressures to investigate published polls may flow from self-serving as well as public interest motives, thus complicating efforts at balanced judgment.

In addition to the thought that must be given to the development and enforcement of adequate standards for poll reporting, the news media must give due consideration to how serious they are about the use of polls to provide the basis for interpretative reporting, generalizations, and predictions. Given the costs of polling there is a strong temptation to cover a variety of issue areas, events, and public figures within a single amalgam poll. Extensive research replaces intensive efforts, single indicators dominate over multiple ones. Yet, if the news media desire to provide more than mere acquaintance with public opinion, more sophisticated, multi-dimensional designs on each issue, event, or political figure would be in order. Such a strategy, however, will only increase the demands upon what for many news organizations are already limited resources. Yet, unless the members of news media are willing to undertake more intensive, comprehensive explorations in selected areas there is little reason to think that the quality of news media polling will improve.

In a similar vein, Noelle-Neumann has suggested that newspapers hire public opinion correspondents who have been trained in public opinion

analysis and political interpretive reporting (Noelle-Neumann, 1980). For most newspapers, this might seem a luxury, but until this type of investment is made in informed reporting, there is little reason to believe that the quality of news media reporting of opinion polls will improve.

Gary Trudeau's Doonesbury comes very close to capturing the distinction between the news media's use of political polling to foster "acquaintance with" rather than "knowledge about" public beliefs, values, and expectations. A pollster sits asking Mike, a leading character in the comic strip, a question, "Okay, one final question. What do you generally think about polls?" The response is to the effect that "Well, frankly. I think there are too many of them. Also, I think they often become self-fulfilling prophesies. People can't help but be influenced by them." The pollster is undeterred: "Actually, Mike, that's something of a misconception. In a recent poll 93% of the respondents indicated the polls had no effect on their opinions." Mike looks confused, "Oh, well, I suppose I could be wrong." The pollster marks his questionnaire: "Why don't I just put you down as undecided?"

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Table 1. Public Perceptions of the Character of Public Financing of Congressional Campaigns

Definition	Percentage of Sample Selecting 1977 (N=2500)	1978 (N=1602)	1979 (N=1659)	1980 (N=1500)
Public financing means the public, average voter, voluntarily contributes to the candidates of his or her choice.	13.9%	13.7%	14.6%	15.0%
Public financing means the candidates raise money as best they can from people or organizations.	17.4	14.7	19.0	10.0
Public financing means the government pays the costs of campaigns using tax dollars.	12.6	23.5	11.5	9.3
Public financing means the government pays the costs of campaigns with tax dollars and the people have no direct control over which candidates get the money.	9.5	9.0	10.0	8.6
Public financing means using tax money, federal government funds, to pay the costs of campaigns in order to keep special interests and other pressure groups out of election financing.	13.3	12.3	10.7	9.5
Public financing of campaigns means the government pays the costs of elections such as election officials, polling places, etc., but the candidates pay the costs of advertising, personal travel, office staff, etc.	13.2	10.7	10.8	9.5
Public financing means the government matches with tax dollars the amount of money a candidate raises or personally contributes to his campaign.	11.9	8.0	14.2	18.5
No response	8.2	8.1	9.2	9.6
	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0

Table 2. Public Perceptions of Consequences of Public Funding of Congressional Elections

Proposition	Percentage in Agreement 1977	1978	1980
Public financing, or federal support of congressional campaigns, will favor incumbent Congressmen already in office since they have name recognition, can use government mailing privileges, have staff workers and do not need as much money to win office.	65.6	58.9	53.8
Public financing is necessary to give challengers a chance to unseat incumbent Congressmen who have many advantages. It's the only way to put competition back into our elections.	47.0	46.9	43.6
The public financing of congressional campaigns would create a vast new federal bureaucracy, very complex and impossible to administer.	56.1	49.2	68.7
Using tax dollars to pay the costs of congressional campaigns for candidates for whom I do not support and do not agree with is wrong.	58.0	65.6	58.7
The best way to finance campaigns for Congress is through voluntary citizen contributions not the use of tax dollars.	69.8	64.9	69.1